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WASHINGTON POST  
15 July 1984

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# The CIA's Bilingual Education

What happens in Mexico is of special importance to the United States. When hard times hit, the flood of illegal aliens over our southern border swells dramatically.

As a State Department analysis has noted, "We are their major trading partners, the recipients of the human abundance and the safety valve for their rural despair."

Certainly the geopolitical facts of life would seem to dictate that U.S. intelligence agencies try to gain at least a minimal inside knowledge of what is going to happen in Mexico. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Though the Institutional Revolutionary Party has held undisputed power in Mexico since 1929, U.S. intelligence has been unable to penetrate its inner circles. Our intelligence experts know more about what is going on inside the Kremlin than they do about the workings of Mexico's ruling party.

It appears to be a question of priorities. While our best intelligence efforts are directed at Moscow and its minions, we seem content to let the Maxwell Smarts handle Mexico City. One CIA source said the lack of expertise can be traced to a basic flaw: too few CIA employees speak Spanish.

This has led to embarrassments that would be amusing if they weren't so serious—such as the CIA agent who had to take along an interpreter when he met an important Mexican party official to ask for secret information.

My associate Dale Van Atta has conducted an extensive investigation of the CIA's pitiful capability in Mexico. He found shocking inadequacies described in secret and top-secret reports and cables from the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the State Department.

Consider this: the last time the CIA found out for certain who had been secretly chosen as the next president of Mexico before it was publicly announced was in 1966, and that was only because the man selected told the CIA himself.

In October 1966, Luis Echeverria Alvarez personally informed the CIA's station chief in Mexico City that he had been chosen to be the next president, to take office in 1970. This intelligence coup was regarded as so spectacular that the information was transmitted to Washington in a super-secret cable.

When Echeverria selected his own successor five years later, he apparently wasn't speaking to the CIA anymore. His choice was Jose Lopez Portillo. But the CIA assured President Ford that Secretary of Government Mario Moya Palencia was "a shoo-in to succeed President Echeverria."

Then the agency had second thoughts and sent Ford a new top-secret report. A new man, Secretary of the Presidency Hugo Cervantes del Rio, had emerged as the likely successor. The CIA report quoted "a high-ranking official" as confiding that Echeverria would pick Cervantes because he was "easier to manipulate than Moya."

The CIA ended its report with a bit of Machiavellian complexity that must have brought furrows to the presidential brow:

"If [Cervantes] continues to hold center stage over the next six weeks, we would have to revise our opinion that Moya is Echeverria's chosen successor. [There is a] possibility that Echeverria has been spotlighting Cervantes just to keep observers guessing a little longer and postponing his own lame-duck status until he announces his choice in mid-October."

Two weeks later the CIA and the rest of the world learned that Echeverria had chosen neither of the two men the CIA was touting, but Jose Lopez Portillo. Echeverria, of course, had made his choice much earlier. Evidence of the CIA's astonishment at this unexpected turn of events was the unintentionally revealing title of one secret report: "Lopez Who?"

In 1981 the CIA did a little better. It correctly predicted—several months before the public announcement—that Miguel de la Madrid would succeed Lopez Portillo the following year. But its report was woefully lacking in any solid information on what the new president's policies might be, or where his allegiances lay.